

From Fëanor to Doctor Faustus: a creator's path to self destruction

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This paper follows up two previous events; the 'Workshop' held at Cambridge in 1988 under the title 'Tolkien and Romanticism' and the corresponding one held at Beverley the following year, notable for Tom Shippey's talk on the interpretation of, the significance of 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhtelm's Son' (*Tolkien 1975*) in relation to Tolkien's work and thought. As to the former, this paper owes its origin to the author's feeling that the Faust myth, which was not touched on then, needed some exploration in relation to Tolkien's own 'legendarium'. As to the latter, Professor Shippey's talk considerably sharpened one's own sense of something peculiarly final and valedictory about Tolkien's own kind of romanticism, and its realisation in his imaginary world. Its outstanding feature, as those who heard it may recall, was its emphasis on the ambivalence of Tolkien's attitude towards, 'the Northern world', and towards, 'the Northern heroic spirit', the mainsprings of his creative imagination. He argued that Tolkien in 'The Homecoming', is going against his own predilections in siding with Tidwald, the party to the dialogue who takes a cynical and critical view of Beorhtnoth's, 'heroic', behaviour in voluntarily staking the issue of battle. The implications of this, he suggested, seemed to be that Tolkien had come to regard the 'Northern heroic spirit', as some-

thing, 'heathen', in essence; something retaining a destructive element in its make-up which required taming, or, in other words, 'Christianising', to exorcise it. This feeling on Tolkien's part, he added, might reflect contemporary events in the, 'real', world, at the time 'The Homecoming', was written. The degradation of the Northern spirit, represented by what had just passed in Nazi Germany, was sufficiently plain, but Tolkien might have been even more affected, he thought, by what he saw of the state of the immediate post-war world.

I do not think that the importance of the outbreak, course, and aftermath of the First World War, as the historical context within which Tolkien's mythology was originally conceived and evolved, can be overestimated. Within these years the old pre-1914 certainties of life, as Tolkien and everyone around him would have known them, had collapsed and vanished. He was, as is well known, profoundly and personally affected in the most shattering way, as all the combatants were. The original 'Lost Tales', may have been, in the beginning, set down in an escapist kind of spirit that seems more than understandable in the light of the circumstances in which the earliest of them were written. It did not however take very long before Tolkien's 'other world', began to 'act up at him', in a non-escapist, ambiguous fashion. A romantic he may have been, but he had to face

the consequences of romanticism in its decline and passing; and it does not have to be said how disastrous for mankind some of them have turned out to be. The combination of romantic nostalgia for the fading and passing beauties of this world shot through with the apprehension of potential horror underlying them is a recurring element in the arts of the period preceding 1914; very much evident in, say, the symphonies of Elgar or of Mahler, to take a couple of instances.

The legend of Faust

The particular myth that embraces the entire course of Romanticism from its beginning to its final convulsions is known to everyone as the legend of Faust. Embodied at the outset in the two parts of Goethe's poetic drama, it finishes up by denying itself in Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, set against the backdrop of Nazi Germany in its final stages of collapse, a novel that consciously presents itself as an antithesis of, or, 'deconstruction', of, Goethe's masterpiece. It was a re-reading on my part of *Doctor Faustus* that provided the final impulse for this paper. In between the two extremes, the Faust myth, mainly of course Goethe's realisation of it, provided a rich source of artistic inspiration and a quarry for source material, notably in music, the quintessentially, 'romantic', art*. The infinite potential of the creative human mind both for good and evil

* Composers who drew on it, from Goethe's own time and subsequently, have included Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Wagner, Berlioz, Gounod, Boito, Mahler, Busoni, and Havergal Brian; this list is probably nothing like comprehensive.

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in the consequences of man's endless search for knowledge, continually stimulated and inspired the finest artistic minds.

It occurred to me that it might be worthwhile to look at Tolkien's imagined world against this kind of background. I have to make it clear that it is not my intention to attempt to stage a revival of the once popular, and now rather passé, pastime of 'detecting influences on Tolkien', supposedly derived from various likely and unlikely sources. He would presumably have been conversant, at least to some extent, with the early origins of the legend of Faust, as exemplified in Marlowe's 1604 play, even though he probably had little direct interest as far as that was concerned. How well he knew either part of Goethe's *Faust*, or both parts, I have not the slightest idea. As far as this paper is concerned, it does not matter at all. On the other hand, the 'Faust myth', in one form or another, had become so much a part of every educated person's consciousness by the time Tolkien started out to build his imaginary world, that he could not wholly have escaped its consequences, even had he so wished. Its presence is felt in his work as one of the many background flavourings in, 'the Soup'. This metaphor of Tolkien's may seem as if it has been a little overworked, but its usefulness is undeniable. The individual manifestation of the 'Faust myth, that is of the greatest interest from our present point of view is, as it happens, the very one which post-dates everything in Middle-earth up to the completion of *The Lord of the Rings*, that is, Mann's novel, about which he can have known nothing whatever. I intend to come back to it at the end of this paper, as a means of indicating the peculiar kind of 'relevance', Tolkien's imagined world bore and still bears to the concerns of the, 'real', world in which he lived and worked, concerns which still trouble us today as profoundly as they did him and his contemporaries. I have, though, to start at the point where the peculiar 'split', in Tolkien's creative personality, the kind of self-doubt upon which Tom Shippey focused in relation to

'Beorhtnoth', first seems to appear. As the mythology is developed and extended over the years, this 'split', comes to be defined above all by the way in which the elves and orcs are seen more and more as linked opposites, projections of the creative and destructive sides of the human personality. But this concept took shape gradually, as I think, over a long period. It is fully present by the time Frodo's words to Sam, in the Tower of Cirth Ungol, come to be spoken. "The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don't think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them" (*Tolkien, 1966c, 190*), whereas it has not fully emerged if looked at in the light of Treebeard's well-known statement that, "Trolls are only counterfeits made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, as Ores were of Elves." (*Tolkien, 1966b, 189*)*. I suggest that the first important evidence of the 'split', is represented by the appearance in, 'The Tales', of Fëanor. When one looks at the mythology, at the 'legendarium', as a whole (if it is indeed a whole), it at once becomes plain that Fëanor occupies a central place in it. He is the key-figure, the hinge on which the whole great Tale, the compendium of the individual Tales, turns.

It of course hardly needs saying that 'Tolkien's 'legendarium', does not contain a Faust-figure as such. No one person enters into a 'contract', with Melkor, or with Sauron, or barter his soul in exchange for knowledge, power, riches, or anything else. (Presumably the Mouth of Sauron has a contract of service, of some kind, but he can hardly be described as a central figure; the Nine Mortal Men enslaved by the nine Rings may, if you like, represent an unconscious use of a Faust-motive). Nevertheless there does seem to be something rather Faust-like about the way Fëanor's career resolves itself into a struggle to transcend the limitations of his own existence: "For man must strive, and striving he must err" (*Goethe 1959a, 41*) says Goethe's Almighty in the dialogue with Mephistopheles at the beginning of Part 1 of 'Faust';

Fëanor is however an Elf, one of the Elder Children of Ilúvatar who have been confined, "within the circles of the world", and perhaps his tragedy is that he was not born a Man instead. The Eldar are summoned by the Valar to dwell in Aman; they are expected to create (or, if the word can be preferred, 'sub-create'), in imitation of Eru. In the end most of them prove unable to remain within the bounds that have been set for them. And this had been foreseen. At the time of the summons, Ulmo, in the council of the Valar, had spoken against it, "thinking it were better for the Quendi to remain in Middle-earth" (*Tolkien, 1977, 59*).

Creative spirit

The 'restlessness', of the Eldar, of the Noldor especially, is the outward symbol and expression of their creative spirit. Fëanor represents that creativity raised to the highest possible degree. He sits, as it were, on the top of the pile; of the three races of the Eldar who go to Aman, it is the Noldor who are, "beloved of Aule" (*Tolkien, 1977, 60*). In the search for knowledge, "they soon surpassed their teachers" (*Tolkien, 1977, 60*), an extremely significant remark. In due time, Fëanor surpasses everyone else. His mother Míriel has previously surpassed all her own kindred in her own craft of weaving and needlework, and her strength then passes into Fëanor himself. Rúmil of Tirion is the first of the Noldor to devise letters, and musical notation, but Fëanor thereafter surpasses him in the devising of the Fëanorian script. This must indeed represent the truest part played by the Noldor, and by Fëanor himself, in the history of Arda. It has much more significance, really, than the fashioning of jewels, of even of the Silmarils themselves, for writing and letters are the foundation of civilisation, as Tolkien and all the rest of us know and have known it, just as they were the foundation of his creative and professional life. Fëanor's name means, 'Spirit of Fire', and the imagery of fire pervades the record of his deeds and ending; it is in him, as ever, the classic symbol of creativity; "Oh for a

* *The surface inconsistency between these two passages has led to some difficulties in interpretation. Tolkien himself (Tolkien, 1981, 190) insists that in the latter passage, 'made', is to be distinguished from 'created', but in the former one 'make' is clearly synonymous with 'create'.*

Muse of fire that will ascend The brightest heaven of invention." He is also *Curufinwë*, and the '*curu*', element in this name, signifying, 'skill', passes on to one of his sons who inherits the largest measure of it, but not for the better. 'Curufin the crafty'; at quite an early stage in the formation of the legendarium, Tolkien is using his own linguistic mode to point the link between the creative and the destructive in human nature; the English words, 'craft', and 'crafty' of course embody the same inherent ambiguity. I would say that this is the point at which the 'split', in Tolkien's attitude to his own handiwork first comes out in the open. Later on the same linguistic ambiguity is to be used to indicate the personality of Saruman, 'Man of Skill', coupled with the double meaning of, 'Orthanc', which in the language of the Mark signifies, 'The Cunning Mind'.

There seems to be a sort of tragic inevitability inherent in the course of Fëanor's existence until his final 'dissolution', (if there is no better word for it). He could not have been and could not have done, perhaps,

any other than what he was, and did. His career presents the spectacle of a swift ascent to a peak, the fashioning of the Silmarils, which is at the same time a fatally decisive action which sets him on a downward path towards extinction. It is instructive to trace this mythological, 'rake's progress', in all its successive stages. Significantly, the devising of the Fëanorian script, which betters the work of Fëanor's predecessor Rúmil, and which represents Fëanor's 'true', place in the history of Arda, is an achievement of his youth. Subsequently he is first among the Noldor to discover how gems, "greater and brighter than those of the Earth", may be made with skill. There is an important distinction to be made between these two feats. The first one is an improvement on art. The second one, more perilous, is an improvement on nature herself.

Fëanor then marries, and Nerdanel his wife, gifted with a higher measure of patience, tries to restrain his over-enthusiastic spirit, in the end unsuccessfully. Her more moderate nature passes, to some

extent, to some, but not all, of her sons. Fëanor himself extends the range of his creative enterprise, and his father-in-law Mahtan instructs him in the making of things in metal and stone. When his father Finwë remarries he develops antipathy towards his stepmother, and then to his new half-brothers, and withdraws into his own concerns.

The naming of Morgoth

At this stage Melkor is pardoned by the Valar after three Ages of Arda, and is allowed to dwell in Aman. Fëanor develops a special hatred of him, and first names him *Morgoth*, ('Dark Enemy'). Amateur psychology might at this point indicate that what he is actually doing is to embark on the dangerous course of denying the 'dark', side of his own nature, pushing back his 'destructive' self into his unconscious. Be that as it may, his own nature seems destined to lead him into some kind of, 'special relationship', with Melkor, even if the contractual element, binding Faust to Mephistopheles, is absent, or at least, seems on the surface to be



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absent. The making of the Silmarils follows directly upon the unchaining of Melkor. Tolkien at this point drops a hint of the tragedy inevitably lying ahead; "it may be", he says, "that some shadow of foreknowledge came to him of the doom that drew near." (*Tolkien, 1977, 67*). The lust and envy of Melkor are roused, and he embarks on the seduction of the Noldor, who begin to, "murmur against the Valar". Fëanor himself begins to look outside Aman; it now seems that his interests and inclinations have undergone a major change of direction. "Fiercest burned the new flame of desire for freedom and wider realms in the eager heart of Fëanor" (*Tolkien, 1977, 68*). The 'flame', may be a new one, but it does not appear to be a flame of creativity. He guards the Silmarils in his own hoard and treats them as his own property; "he seldom remembered now that the light within them was not his own" (*Tolkien, 1977, 69*).

The next following sequence of events makes the deterioration in his moral stance quite plain. It starts with his turning his craft and skills to the making of a secret forge, and to using it to produce weapons of war; he makes swords and helmets for himself and his sons. Mahtan his father-in-law now regrets having taught him the skill in metalworking that he himself originally learned from Aulë. In this rebellious mood he begins to speak openly against the Valar, and an open breach follows with his half-brother Fingolfin; the result of this is that he is summoned to appear before the Valar, and receives a sentence of banishment. This does not appear to have any effect on him. He retires to Formenos, and makes a fortress, and a hoard of weapons and treasure there, locking the Silmarils in a chamber of iron. At this point Melkor appears there and confronts him; with the apparent intention of playing Mephistopheles to Fëanor's Faust, he tries to enlist him on his own side. However, as it happens he overplays his hand. In the midst of his efforts to inflame Fëanor's rage and his suspicions of the Valar, he allows his own lust for the Silmarils to show itself. He leaves Formenos

with the Northern heroic equivalent of a flea in his ear.

We now arrive at the central sequence of events which represents the Darkening of Valinor. Fëanor is summoned to Valmar from Formenos, and while he is there the assault of Melkor and Ungoliant upon the Two Trees takes place. Yavanna appeals for the aid of the Silmarils in restoring the light of the Trees. Fëanor withholds it. To break them, he says in effect, would mean breaking him as well; "never again shall I make their like". Melkor has meanwhile reached Formenos, slain Finwë, Fëanor's father, and taken the Silmarils. This would have happen in any case, says the Tale, whether Fëanor had refused Yavanna or not. "Yet had he said yea to Yavanna at first, before the tidings came from Formenos, it may be that his after deeds would have been other than they were" (*Tolkien, 1977, 79*). There has been, therefore, a moment of decisive choice; after it, Fëanor's path is set irreversibly downward towards destruction. I will return to the actual words he speaks later on, and quote them then, as they relate closely to the main theme of this paper.

The death of Fëanor

The pace of events now begins to accelerate. Fëanor appears in Túna and inflames the Noldor to revolt. "Fierce and fell were his words, and filled with anger and pride, and hearing them the Noldor were stirred to madness." (*Tolkien, 1977, 82*). I am not sure exactly when Tolkien wrote these words, but their applicability to the 1930s is rather striking. This exercise of the power of mob-oratory is followed by the theatrical, not to say operatic scene of the oath-taking of Fëanor and his sons; they swear to pursue the Silmarils to the ends of the earth. Dissension breaks out, and Fëanor is opposed by Fingolfin and Turgon, and also with more moderation by Finarfin, but his side prevails in the end, and the Noldor prepare to depart and set out for Middle-earth. The herald of Manwë appears, bent on restraining their departure, but his words of warning are ignored, and Fëanor's response to him con-

tains significant words which will turn out to have given to the familiar imagery a new and sinister emphasis. "It may be", says Fëanor, "that Eru has set in me a fire greater than thou knowest." (*Tolkien, 1977, 85*). What this new fire may be will soon become clear.

The following sequence of events alienates Fëanor permanently from all the rest of the Eldar except those of his own house. These events are: the parley with the Teleri at Alqualondë, the subsequent battle with them and the Kinslaying; the escape of the Noldor in the ships of the Teleri; the judgement passed on them, and signalled to them on their subsequent road, recorded as "The Prophecy of the North"; and finally the crossing of the Helcaraxë and subsequently, the burning of the ships at Fëanor's orders. Their return across the straits is rendered impossible, and the subsequent passage across the straits of the section of the host led by Fingolfin has to be undertaken and achieved without them. By this time Fëanor appears to accept the inevitability of his own 'doom', and even to welcome it; the 'Northern heroic spirit', in him has now reached its highest level of intensity. With the burning of the ships the symbolism of, 'The Spirit of Fire', has reached a wholly destructive stage; at this point the words "he laughed as one fey", are applied to him; the epithet will recur at the time of his death. This word *fey*, like others characteristic of Tolkien's 'archaic', or 'high', styles, is used to convey a kind of coded meaning, for which, 'mad', is a wholly inadequate equivalent*.

Fëanor's end is not long in coming once the Noldor have arrived in Middle-earth. It takes place, not in the actual battle, the Dagor-nuin-Giliath, that quickly follows, but in its aftermath. The battle itself is a victory, and the remaining Orcs flee from the field in retreat. Fëanor alone presses on in their wake, senselessly and unnecessarily. It is his last and most typical piece of, 'Beorhtnothery', if one may be allowed to coin the word. "He was fey", says Tolkien, "consumed by the flame of his own wrath." He is

*For those who know Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, the untranslatable word 'Wahn', (illusion), which implies a combination of insanity, frenzy, and delusion, both private and public, perhaps comes quite close to it.

finally smitten to the ground and fatally wounded. Borne back by his sons towards Mithrim he dies looking out from afar at the peaks of Thangorodrim, and "so fiery was his spirit that as it sped his body fell to ash, and was borne away like smoke." (*Tolkien, 1977, 107*). The new fire of which he boasted to the herald of Manwë as the host prepared to depart from Túna has turned on him and consumed him at last.

Is it not evident from Fëanor's life-history that the making of the Silmarils constitutes both the peak of it, and its single catastrophic error? He ensnared the light of the Two Trees, a universal light, in which no 'property' existed. The deterioration in his character started to show itself as soon as he had made the Silmarils, in the possessiveness that overtook him from that time on. The underlying cause of it was his realising that he had made something which he himself could not surpass. he could not strive after perfection any longer; he had achieved it, and all that 'creation', could represent for him after that was mere pattern-making. The essence of creativity is not perfection, but the tireless search for it; Faust was required to strive ceaselessly and never to pause to contemplate, 'the passing moment'. Fëanor's words at the time of his refusal of Yavanna's plea for the aid of the Silmarils show that he has betrayed himself into falling in love with the work of his own hands: "For the less even as for the greater there is some deed that he may accomplish but once only, and in that deed his heart shall rest." (*Tolkien, 1977, 78*). This is the equivalent of the fatal words that in Faust's contract with Mephistopheles were to doom him.

"Then to the moment I can say .
Linger you now, you are so fair."
(*Goethe 1959b, 270*)

('Verweile doch, du bist so schön'). (I have deliberately misquoted the words which Faust actually does speak just before his death in Part II of *Faust*. Goethe, at the last minute, replaced, 'can say', with 'could say', so that Faust escapes damnation by a hairs-breadth; and is shown as redeemed in the final scene of *Faust*).

Impermissible act

I believe that from Tolkien's own point of view Fëanor's making of the Silmarils represented a dangerous and impermissible act, one that exceeded the bounds intended for the Elder Children of Ilúvatar. I do not of course, suggest that there is any autobiographical element about his concept of Fëanor's character; that would be absurd. I think, on the other hand, that he sensed that there could be a certain applicability to his own situation about it, and that this affected his subsequent attitude towards his own creative work. The word 'fey', as it appears in relation to Fëanor does as it happens have an exact counterpart in the German original equivalent of Tolkien's own name, *tolkkühn*. I do not mean that he thought that either epithet in either language was in any way applicable to himself, but he can hardly have been unaware of the linguistic implications. These will, incidentally, present us towards the end of this paper with an exceedingly picturesque coincidence. The outward sign of all this is the curious appearance of inhibition which seems to characterise Tolkien's attitude to his imaginative writing. At a superficial level he was probably worried about what his professional colleagues might say if they knew about it. They would accuse him of, 'wasting his time on this sort of stuff', while he ought to have been getting on with his scholastic work. At a deeper level there may have been something about the whole idea of, 'creativity', that conflicted with his deeply ingrained religious sense. He needed to rationalise and justify his own position, to legitimise his invention, to enable him to carry on writing. He did so by evolving the idea of, 'sub-creation', set down in the Andrew Lang lecture, later an essay, 'On Fairy Stories' (*Tolkien 1964*). The artist is seen as a sort of feudal tenant-in-chief of a medieval king, making his own little world in imitation of the one into which he himself is made. The subordinate, or 'sub-creative', role allotted to the individual as artist, contrasts very strongly with the assumption of overriding status as belonging to the art-form itself, the writing of fantasy. Tolkien might have felt inhibited about acknowledging his own status as an

artist; but that does not imply that he thought that what he was doing was not supremely important.

This sense of 'perfection', or completeness, as something to be shunned as much as possible, seems manifest in Tolkien's notorious disinclination (I do not believe it was inability) to finish anything. From *The Book of Lost Tales* on, not a single major project is carried all the way to completion; some of course come within a reasonable distance of it. He finished *The Hobbit*, but he had to be prodded into doing that, and of course he never regarded that work in the same light as his long-term preoccupation with his older mythology - it wasn't at the heart of his imaginative thinking as *The Silmarillion* was. The single major exception to the rule turns out to be no exception at all. Tolkien did not think of *The Lord of the Rings* as something independently complete in itself, but rather as the last leaf of a triptych of which large sections of the other two leaves remained unfilled. He expended some twenty-odd closely packed pages in outlining the whole panorama to Milton Waldman (*Tolkien, 1981, 143-161*), and also, for a time, drove George Allen and Unwin Ltd nearly frantic by insisting that *The Silmarillion* was as large as *The Lord of the Rings*, of equal importance, and that consequently it should be published in tandem with it. Niggle's Tree, in other words, can never be completed in this 'fallen', world; it would encourage presumptuousness to believe otherwise.

Another piece of Tolkien's writing that I suspect also bears some relation to this aspect of his thought is, 'The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun', (*Tolkien 1945*). I am not trying to offer anything like a cut-and-dried interpretation of this piece, but it has always struck me as a rather strange choice of subject from Tolkien's point of view unless one postulates a kind of applicability about the tale to an artist's creativity. The physical act of procreation is, after all a common enough metaphor for it; many painters (Turner for instance), writers and composers have thought of or referred to their pictures or their books or their scores as their, 'children'. The Lord Aotrou, in his desire

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for posterity, breaks the bounds of what is 'allowable', or legitimate, laid down by his religion, as Fëanor tried to exceed the bounds prescribed for the Eldar in Aman. The remarkable feature of the tale from the present point of view, however, is that the motive of a contract with the Devil, or the Devil's representative, is genuinely present. His punishment, when the bargain proves impossible of fulfilment, occurs, as far as we can tell, in this world, not in the next; but perhaps he is the closest approach to a Faust figure in Tolkien's writing, even if only in miniature. We will also be encountering the Corrigan, the witch as the Devil's representative, shortly again, playing the same role in a twentieth century context.

Other resonances

Further reason for giving 'The Tale of Fëanor' (I call it that for convenience's sake) a central place in the structure of Tolkien's thought lies in the way its essence seems to recur in the two principal Tales of the Second and Third Ages; the rise and fall of Númenor, and the History of the One Ring. I will briefly indicate some ways in which they seem to correspond. The Dunedain, once they are settled in Númenor, develop a rich and complex civilisation. While they are passing through the early stages of the formation of their culture, they derive much from the Eldar in Eressëa, and in the west of Middle-earth. They learn their language and take from them their nomenclature. Then they begin to surpass their teachers, as the Eldar had previously done, emerging from the tutelage of the Valar. The particular occupation which symbolises their creative spirit and creative powers is shipbuilding and seacraft. As mariners and 'men of peace', they first bring their civilisation to the shores of Middle-earth. The port and harbour of Vinyalondë and other outposts are set up through which trading and other relations with the indigenous and other peoples of the mainlands develop and are fostered. This in retrospect seems like a kind of Renaissance period in Middle-earth in the Second Age; an outburst of creative

energy comparable to the expansion of Europe at the close of the Middle Ages. The final years of Númenor's history might likewise be thought of in terms of that of the first half of the twentieth century, the rise of the tyrannies, fascism, Stalinism, and the destruction of the old, 'bourgeois, liberal and humanist', Europe in two world wars. There is an obvious 'applicability', which presumably Tolkien had no conscious thought of expressing. Men in Middle-earth who at first had been civilised by the Númenoreans, when the latter ultimately come as warriors and overlords, are instead terrorised.

The Tale of Aldarion and Erendis, within the compass of one particular story and one set of events, is a kind of parable of Númenorean history, a commentary on its progress from its beginnings to the final downfall. The destructive element is Aldarion's insistence on pressing on with his shipbuilding schemes and his voyages in defiance both of his public and personal obligations. It is a classic instance of the kind of presumptuousness* that has been the undoing of Fëanor, and represents, once more, 'creativity', out of control, turning on its possessor, with consequences not merely personal but also fatal for society as a whole. Erendis' abandonment by Aldarion and the resulting strangeness of her relationship with her daughter have consequences as regards the Numenorean succession which ultimately issue in the last catastrophe. In the end the last Numenorean king challenges the might of Sauron and another 'special relationship', ensues. The largest armada ever seen is built and launched; the Ban of the Valar is broken, and the world is changed. This is not the climax of an 'action replay' of the Tale of Fëanor; but there is a notable similarity of outline and underlying meaning.

The History of the One Ring might on the other hand be seen as standing in an inverted relationship with the Tale of Fëanor; turning it upside-down, as it were, with, at its centre, the One Ring as a 'debased' counterpart of the Silmarils. The latter represented an ideal of beauty and perfection, and as such only

presented a threat to those who held them with intent to possess them; then their effects were instantaneously felt, those who held them being tormented with physical pain. (The One Ring operates in a precisely contrary way, producing an apparent beneficial physical effect to start with, and fostering possessiveness, not repelling it).

Maedhros and Maglor, the two of Fëanor's sons who have inherited the largest measure of his 'positive', creative qualities, become in the end the most tragic of them. They make their way into the camp of Eönwë, after the Last Battle with Morgoth in which the two remaining Silmarils have been recovered, and make off with them. The hollowness of the claim of Fëanor and his house to ownership is at once apparent to them, and in their torment they are forced to cast them away. The death of Maedhros, casting a Silmaril and himself into a crack of fire in the earth, which clearly anticipates Gollum's end in Orodruin, provides a highly significant link between the two Tales. Maglor's torment is that of the artist who realises the unattainability of an ideal; he casts a Silmaril into the sea and, 'wanders ever singing in pain and regret beside the waves', (*Tolkien, 1977, 254*), - one of the most haunting images in Tolkien's works.

If the Silmarils enshrine ideal beauty, the One Ring enshrines its opposite - power. As a complementary counterpart of the Silmarils it too is beautiful to look on, at least outwardly; 'of all the works of Sauron the only fair'. It represents the debasement of creativity; the values of true art turned upside down; the cacophony introduced by Melkor into the Music of the Ainur. Its making links it firmly with the history of Fëanor and the Fëanorians, through Celebrimbor, the chief of the Elvensmiths of Eregion, and the son of Curufin, 'the crafty', who, 'desired in his heart to rival the skill and fame of Fëanor', (*Tolkien, 1980b, 236*). The Elvensmiths traffic with Sauron in the Second Age, and obtain his instruction in the making of rings, at first the lesser ones, and in the end the Three Rings forged by Celebrimbor himself, whose

*Or *ofermod*, in the Old English equivalent, translated by Tolkien as, 'overmastering pride'. It is no less applicable to Fëanor himself.

existence leads to the forging of the One Ring by Sauron, 'to rule them all'. There is perhaps, even a sense in which the War of the Ring may be thought of as a, 'War of the Silmarils', in reverse, viewed from the other side, the Enemy's side. Sauron has to wage it, in order to regain, in his turn, the work of his own hand which has been taken from him, and his war, like that of the Elves in Beleriand, becomes a 'long defeat'.

The significance of Faustus

Tolkien's world, as principally represented by Fëanor's part in it, and as seen against a late romantic back-

ground, may seem to display some congruences with the legend of Faust, or echoes of it, but not to provide an exact of comprehensive equivalent. Fëanor, up to now, may be thought to qualify as a 'Faust figure', of a sort; however the relationship is not quite a direct one, but lies at a tangent. I now come, though, to review the particular version of the legend of Faust that started me off on this enquiry. This is Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, and to those who know it the comparison may initially seem a very strange one indeed. Tolkien's world existed and exists, entirely in his imagination, and in ours; its relation

to, or connections with, his and our contemporary world, and with history as it was being made at the time of its own making, arise, (assuming that they arise at all), purely by implication. Thomas Mann in *Doctor Faustus*, (written at nearly the same time as *The Lord of the Rings*), is concerned, on the other hand, with the crisis in the culture and identity of his own country at a catastrophic period in its history; he employs a multiplicity of allusive devices to make it appear even more 'historical' than it is. Nevertheless, it represents the point at which Tolkien's 'mythology', and the 'Faust myth', actually intersect.



The Mariner's Wife - Jef Murray

Mallorn XLI

I cannot think of a better way of putting it than by saying that the hero, or rather, 'anti-hero', of Doctor Faustus, the imaginary composer Adrian Leverkühn, is a Fëanor of our times, a Fëanor playing out his role as a symbol and key-figure of the crisis of the first half of the twentieth century, the aftermath and end-product of Romanticism.

At this point I have to provide an outline of the content of Doctor Faustus, in order to make the above comparison, and the reasons underlying it, seem at all understandable. It will have to be an exceedingly rough outline; *Doctor Faustus* is a long and complex work, and full of allusions and references at every turn to Mann's own world; the Germany which he left in 1933, just after Hitler's assumption of power. However the complex detail does not really affect the issue for the present purpose.

The story is that of the life of a composer, Adrian Leverkühn, told by his closest friend. It is now that the picturesque coincidence arises, which I mentioned previously. Mann chose the name of his hero consciously, to indicate his personality. 'Leverkühn', ('living audaciously') is a partial congruence with, 'tollkühn', – it would be appropriate as characterising Fëanor, at least in the early part of his career. (Mann's actual allusion is to Nietzsche and Zarathustra, although that does not concern us here). Serenus Zeitblom, the narrator, is depicted as telling his friend's life-story at the time when his own world is collapsing in ruins around him; he 'writes', as from within Nazi Germany during the closing stages of the Second World War. (This is an interesting parallel to Tolkien's setting out to build his mythology while surrounded by the evidences of the collapse of the old pre-1914 world, including his own part of it). Zeitblom is a teacher by profession, and represents the archetypal, 'Good German', brought up within the old bourgeois world of German culture; 'the land of poets and thinkers', of Goethe and Schiller, of Bach and Beethoven. (In Númenorean terms,

he is one of, 'the Faithful'). The early part of the book recounts Leverkühn's upbringing and musical training; the stages through which he develops to attain technical mastery of the essentials of his art. His teacher, the organist Wendell Kretzschmar, is a kind of benevolent father-figure to him; one whose tutelage he is destined to outgrow, just as the Noldor 'surpassed their teachers'. He initially cannot see a future for himself in music, and turns to studying theology for some intervening years. Eventually he resumes his studies in music and composition, but he still sees no future for himself as a creative artist, constrained as he is within the discipline under which he has been brought up. (His budding genius has been apparent from the beginning). That discipline of course is the mainstream of German music through Bach and Beethoven and the, 'early romantics', up to Wagner and the end of the nineteenth century, and for Leverkühn the challenge is to 'break out of it', in order that his composing shall be more than mere pattern-making.

The episode which represents his, breaking out also symbolises his contract with the Devil. It is, on the surface, only the fact of his having consorted with a prostitute (the 'Corrigan', of Aotrou and Itroun in another shape), or his being assumed to have done so; the incident is not directly narrated. There is another factual allusion here – to Nietzsche, who died insane, supposedly as a result of syphilis contracted when still a student. Leverkühn is to become insane in the last years of his life, and the fate is a traditional one for composers of the romantic era. There is a parallel symbolic allusion; to the intellectuals in Germany who, 'gave themselves', to authoritarianism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s. The effect of Leverkühn's encounter with 'the Corrigan', is to release his individual voice as a musician. His music develops along unprecedented lines, and a succession of works show him evolving a new method of composition – a new musical sys-

tem which will replace the old. A feature of his new music is that the letters of the prostitute's name HET-AERA¹ ESMERALDA, translated into notes, make up a musical code which recurs repeatedly in his works. The 'new musical system', which Leverkühn invents so as to replace the old, is actually a deliberate imitation² of musical history as it happened in reality. The 'real-life', model is the exhaustion of the old tonal system (the major and minor keys and their relations with each other) and the 'serial' or 'twelve-tone', system pioneered by Arnold Schönberg with the intention of replacing it.

There is, however, a horrific price to be paid for Leverkühn's new-found freedom. His, 'new musical system', is the outcome of 'devilish', inspiration, and in a section in the middle of the book, the Devil himself, appears to Leverkühn to explain the nature of the bond that now exists between them. This passage has, of course, to be understood as symbolic, not real; it is not part of Zeitblom's narrative, but is told as though it has been reconstructed afterwards, from what Leverkühn himself, displaying early signs of insanity, has written down about it. Its message is the inversion of all pre-existing musical values. Sublimity, solemnity, and order are henceforth to be represented by discord and dissonance; harmony and consonance will stand only for chaos, confusion, disorder; in a word, Hell. The formal rules of composition in the 'New Order' in music (one could call it a 'Music of the Ainur', newly devised by Melkor) are nevertheless to be absolute, 'totalitarian', in their strictness and rigidity. All of this represents, at one level, a political allegory for the New Order, in music is to be equated with the barbarism of the 'New Order', in Europe; the rule of the Thousand-Year Reich.

Leverkühn's career as a composer reaches its climax with his final masterpiece, the 'symphonic cantata', 'The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus'. Mann's account of this imaginary work, perhaps the

1. A title – it refers to the 'professional', prostitute class in Athens of the fifth century BC.

2. Many of Schönberg's followers were infuriated; the descriptions of Leverkühn's music in the novel do not really suggest anything very much like orthodox 'twelve-tone', music as it became known. Mann also introduced the names of 'real', musicians (the conductors Otto Klemperer and Bruno Walter and the tenor Karl Erb) as performers of Leverkühn's imaginary works.

most remarkable piece of descriptive writing about music ever produced by a non-musician, draws the sharpest possible contrast between the, 'totalitarian', strictness of the new system within which it is composed – 'there was no longer any free note' he says – and the intense subjectivity of its emotional expression. But the only emotions it expresses are those of utter agony and despair; like Maglor, Leverkühn's Faust is doomed, 'ever to wander singing in pain and regret beside the waves'. As Mann himself in *Doctor Faustus*, has 'unwritten', the Faust of Goethe, so does Leverkühn, in his final masterpiece, symbolically 'unwrite', Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, with its concluding Ode to Joy, the supreme affirmative symbol of the dawn of the romantic age in music. So appalled is Zeitblom by the unrelieved despair of Leverkühn's masterpiece that he tries to seek consolation in the void beyond it. "Expressiveness – expression as lament – is the issue of the whole construction; then may we not parallel it with another, a religious one, and say too (though only in the lowest whisper) that out of the wholly irremediable hope might germinate? It would be but a hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair – not betrayal to her, but the miracle that passes belief." (*Mann, 1949*). What a thoroughly Tolkienian attitude that is! – the very spirit that sustains Frodo and Samwise on their journey into

Mordor! It is also the only thing that sustains Zeitblom himself, at the very end of *Doctor Faustus*, as he contemplates the shattered ruin that is all that is left of Germany. "When, out of uttermost hopelessness – a miracle beyond the power of belief – will the light of hope dawn? A lonely man folds his hands and speaks, 'God be merciful to thy poor soul, my friend, my Fatherland!'" (*Mann, 1949*).

The completion of the work signals Leverkühn's physical collapse and the loss of his reason. At a musical gathering at which he is due to play extracts from the work and comment on it, he talks confusedly and nonsensically, confesses the 'devilish', origin of his inspiration, and breaks down. He becomes insane, and dies in 1940, a few years afterwards.

The corruption of genius

I hope that some correspondences between Fëanor's 'mythological rake's progress', and Adrian Leverkühn's fictional-historical one emerge reasonably clearly from the foregoing. The history of both is that of genius corrupted finally into insanity; the creative drive turns on its possessor and destroys him, and with him a good part of the fabric of society. Thomas Mann, well before 1933, could witness the spectacle, at close quarters, of civilisation about to slide into barbarism. Tolkien likewise had plenty of opportunities for observing and comment-

ing on the same spectacle, or a similar one, and he did so, in many and varied ways. For him the sight of green country ruined and despoiled by industrial or commercial development was simply one single manifestation of it; "just another of the works of Mordor". It is noteworthy that Tolkien's letters display no particular satisfaction or any feeling of exultation about the end of the Second World War; rather than that they convey the sense that the underlying situation of mankind has not changed*. Above all there is his appalled response to the news of the making of the atomic bomb, and its use on Japan, "Well, we're in God's hands. But He does not look kindly on Babel-builders." (*Tolkien, 1981, 116*).

Here, if you like, is the new "fire set in me, greater than thou knowest" of which Fëanor boasts in his response to the herald of Manwë as the Noldor prepare to leave Aman. It seems quite remarkable in the face of this that there are still people who are prepared to believe that Tolkien's world holds nothing beyond a straightforward conflict between the uncorrupt good and the irredeemably evil. Quite otherwise, he constantly returns to one particular theme; that the creative and destructive forces in man's nature are indivisibly linked; this is the essence of the 'fallen world', in which we live. It is not a particularly comforting message, but it is an eminently contemporary one.

*See page 13 for T A Shippey's view of the significance of 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son', in this connection.

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